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The New Leakers

The torrent of leaks by Carter administration officials that instantly followed the aborted rescue mission is an intelligence fiasco that may cost the United States more dearly than the fiasco in the desert itself.

Besides jeopardizing the lives of U.S. agents in Tehran, the massive spillage of official secrets betrays to the world a government out of control. "This criminal act could not have taken place if Jimmy Carter were in charge of his own administration," one well-placed specialist familiar with covert operations told us. "There is no one around able to compel silence."

Such comments in intelligence and national security circles are the talk of the town. While Soviet propaganda seizes on the leaks to trumpet U.S. subversion against Iran, senior officials in Washington are dumbfounded and dismayed at how secrets denied to Congress are leaked to the news media. The fragile intelligence system has suffered a relapse, and tarnished U.S. credibility has been further undermined.

Who is leaking? Possibly military officers who never thought the plan would work, trying to clear their skirts. Possibly defenders of the mission who believe that the more known about it, the better it will look to critics. Senior officials claim two things: first, President Carter has ordered silence; second, neither he nor they know the origin of the leaks.

Obviously, this has endangered undercover Americans exposed by leak as having been assigned key roles in Tehran for later stages of the three-phased rescue attempt. But deeper implications stem from Moscow's eager use of the leaks.

Soviet commentators in Moscow, picking up leaked secrets from the U.S. press and television, have been systematically spilling inside information about the U.S. rescue operation across the pages of Pravda and Izvestia. "Internal counterrevolutionary forces" were targeted for on-the-spot help to the U.S. rescue team, Izvestia informed its readers April 29.

On May 1, Pravda's top political writer, Yuriy Zhukov, backed up his charge that the United States was out to destroy the Islamic republic. He cited evidence leaked in the United States that there was a "fifth column" of undercover Americans allegedly on the ground in Tehran.

Such alleged revelations would be expected even if Soviet opinion organs were manufacturing them. What makes these Soviet reports so damaging to the United States is that every intelligence service in the free world knows they were in fact picked up from reasonably accurate reports leaked from within a Carter administration helpless to prevent it.

Warnings have been informally delivered to U.S. intelligence agencies that allied foreign intelligence services are going to stop cooperating with the United States for a time. The reason: the United States has proved once again, in even more humiliating fashion than before, that it cannot protect its intelligence methods.

This same charge was made during the post-Watergate crisis of the Central Intelligence Agency, when secrets were sprayed around the world amidst non-stop congressional investigations of supposed excesses. The new leakers are U.S. officials inside Jimmy Carter's own bureaucracy who feel so little restraint from above that, whatever their purposes, they have taken upon themselves the intimate detailing of the nation's disastrous failure.

Intelligence officials have drafted a letter to Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti asking for an immediate FBI

investigation. The letter has been held up. Such FBI probes seldom discover anything. Worse, if anybody charged with violating security laws goes to court, it becomes impossible to protect any secrets at all.

But the president may yet order in the FBI. So far, he has been inclined against an investigation started in the suspicious and supercharged political atmosphere following the rescue failure. He could change his mind if the steadily building resentment on Capitol Hill should explode.

That might happen soon. Senior intelligence officials are being called for unannounced appearances before congressional committees. Their orders are clear: give no details of the aborted rescue effort.

This will enrage members of Congress who see the leaking bureaucracy out of control, a symptom of an administration losing its capacity to govern. That raises again the question of whether a country that cannot keep a secret, even at the risk of its own men's lives, can long control its destiny.

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